

It's When Things Look Favorable That Shortgrassers Get Worried

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MERTZON — A feeling of unrest has spread across this land the Indians called "Desperate Passage." Things don't look right. Most stations have reported March rains; the markets are displaying unusual strength. The signs point toward rough going ahead for the Shortgrass Country.

The only good omen has been the occasional outbursts of west wind. After the rain of a fortnight ago, the westerlies struck with their normal dehydrating fury. Newborn lambs were left to hunt for wind-crazed mothers. Tumbleweeds formed rows along the fencelines. Mother cows, the prima donas of the range, set up an awful racket for their daily handout. For 24 hours it appeared that we were back on the path to normalcy.

By no means was this the worst windstorm that ever hit the area. Back during the glorious dry catastrophe of the late '50s a west wind hit the ranch so hard it blew a pride of wild house cats under the kitchen doorsill.

Like all the two and four-legged creatures of those difficult times, these cats were wintering mighty thin. Then, too, the air currents whipping around the south side of the house were perfect to whip them beneath the door.

A cowboy boarding with us (and it would be downright dishonest to use the phrase "working for us") claimed the cats got in when the door blew open. But as anyone knows who has studied unbroke felines, neither trail hands nor the forces of nature could herd a pack of range-free cats through a 16-foot gate, much less push them through an average-size doorway. That cowpuncher was like a lot of other folks in those days: the wind and dust had loosened up the washers in the most integral parts of his cerebellum.

We had a terrible time getting those outlaws in the open gate again. Even around a batch outfit, it's the grossest form of bad manners to shoot in the house. Without an experienced female broom handler present, that age-old household weapon was useless. Fortunately we both knew that we'd have to use patience. There never lived a bunch of corriente steers that could mess up a loading chute as bad as a few excited cats can a house.

What had to serve for spring came and left before we were rid of the invaders. With toms and tabbies roasting in the closets and dark corners, it seemed at times as if complete surrender would be the most dignified way out. A circus cat handler could have sold his services at a premium.

Man has never been able to justify why he needed the wind to come from four directions. North, south and east winds would have been plenty to serve our needs. I suppose having so many different ones is probably linked to the same deviltry that resulted in such foolishness as daylight saving time and leap years.

Anyway, the prospect of a good season has everyone worried out here. Surely a dust cloud will come along soon and knock us back to our normal hard times.